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SUBJECT: UNANIMOUS PRAISE FOR PRESIDENT'S OUTSPOKEN BURMA  
STANCE AT ASEAN

REF: MANILA 3647 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Arroyo took a bold stance on Burma at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore, plainly warning that the Philippine Congress would likely not ratify the ASEAN Charter if Burma did not release Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and pursue rapid democratic reform. Arroyo returned to the Philippines to widespread praise from across the political spectrum, and from a media that rarely extols her policy actions. Reflecting broad international support for her position, President Arroyo was also commended by a European Union parliamentary delegation visiting the country, whose chair called the Philippines a "pillar of democracy" in Southeast Asia. Department of Foreign Affairs officials stressed that President Arroyo's comments underscore her determination that the Philippine government will maintain strong public pressure for progress toward democracy in Burma, a stance that has been bolstered by frequent consultations and exchanges with senior USG officials over the past year. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) At the 13th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit in Singapore, November 18-22, the Philippines proved to be the most outspoken critic of Burma among the 10 member nations of ASEAN. While the 10 member nations signed the ASEAN Charter as expected, President Arroyo pointed out the regime's human rights abuses and warned that unless Burma released Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, the Philippine Congress "would have extreme difficulty in ratifying the ASEAN Charter." In a separate statement, President Arroyo, who received a private briefing by United Nations special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, after the cancellation of his briefing to ASEAN leaders, stressed that the Philippines remained "concerned that the forces of authoritarianism still move rather slowly toward democracy in Myanmar."

¶3. (SBU) Returning to the Philippines early due to an impending typhoon, the President was met with rare universal praise for her stance on Burma. Even Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel, possibly President Arroyo's staunchest critic in the Senate, praised and supported her "unexpected ultimatum" to Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein. He echoed the President's warning, stating that the "Senate would find it hard to ratify the ASEAN Charter unless democracy is restored and Aung Sang is freed." Similarly, Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, a maverick politician known for his independent streak, professed "admiration" for the President's courage. "Our President is the only one brave enough, the others in the ASEAN are afraid of the Generals of Burma," he was quoted as saying. Reflecting international support for her position, President Arroyo was also commended

by a European Union parliamentary delegation visiting the country, whose chair, Hartmut Nassauer, called the Philippines a "pillar of democracy" in Southeast Asia.

14. (U) Editorials in major newspapers were unusually complimentary. One editorial praised her for showing "ASEAN's hypocrisy and double talk on Burma," while another declared that her "frank and very public criticism of Burma was probably unprecedented, but certainly well-deserved." Philippine Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye told the media that with the signing of the ASEAN Charter, President Arroyo had achieved her goals at the Summit. He added that the President had made a "significant contribution" in the crafting of the Charter while in Cebu, Philippines, site of the 12th ASEAN Summit.

15. (C) Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Asia and Pacific Affairs Executive Director Hellen Barber characterized President Arroyo's discussion with Burmese Prime Minister Thein Sein as her primary event in Singapore. President Arroyo stressed in that meeting that the release of political prisoners was of paramount importance, to which Sein responded that the Burmese government was serious about making progress, but "needed time." DFA ASEAN Affairs Executive Director Benito Valeriano said that the Philippines had too much at stake to fail in ratifying the charter. Valeriano noted that the Philippine government could use the time it takes to ratify the charter to place even greater pressure on Burma. He said the Congress would have to convene a committee and hold hearings and then wait for "the right political climate" to vote on ratification. Valeriano predicted a six-month to one-year period in which Arroyo could ratchet up the pressure on Burma before Senate ratification came to a vote.

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16. (C) COMMENT: President Arroyo continues to take a leadership role on Burma in ASEAN even after the Philippine hand-off as ASEAN chair to Singapore. Philippine instincts to press for democratic change in Burma have been significantly bolstered by external reinforcement, including Arroyo's participation in the Secretary's women's leaders event at UNGA, the Deputy Secretary's discussions with Foreign Secretary Romulo, EAP discussions with Philippine officials in Manila and Washington, and post's interventions at all levels throughout the most current crisis. The confluence of these factors helps explain why President Arroyo is well prepared to stand alone on Burma even in the face of ASEAN's emphasis on harmony and its time-honored rule of non-interference in other countries affairs.

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